

# **Splash Zones**

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In the Department of Art and Art History  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon

By

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## List of Illustrations

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## Exhibition Statement

Looking back, I had an idyllic childhood. I was the middle of three brothers, all close in age and we were lucky to have many other children our own age to play with in the neighborhood. We played constantly, mostly outside games such as capture the flag or laser tag, but also with computer games, which involved innovation and creativity. Computer games were our passion, perhaps inherited from our father who had adopted software development as a career path after my parents retired from missionary work in Haiti. My father, who passed away on June 1<sup>st</sup> of this year, was incredibly innovative, with the ability to disassemble and reassemble complex software systems to find out how they worked. His natural curiosity was drawn to complexity, and he enjoyed thinking while doing; his creativity was stimulated by tinkering with physical objects. As children, we inherited this thirst for innovation, reassembling the computer games we played in the physical environment of our backyard.

This desire to create, to re-envision, comes easily to children. As adults, we become bogged down with responsibilities, which for most people, shuts down the play instinct. Through life, many of us try to regain the flicker of childhood play with various degrees of success. Without reminders, adults can go through life and abandon this instinct, which others might regard as “childish” or “infantile.” *Splash Zones* is a call to re-imagine the complex perceptions of our physical environment, and to revel in the joy of spirited playfulness.

As we mature, we learn to trade present possibilities for future benefits. Being able to assess future needs against present pleasures is hardwired into our consciousness, evolution and upbringing. However, during my MFA studies, I have realized that, for me, focusing too much on the future at the expense of the present has limitations. Planning involves seeing the possible manifestation of ideas, understanding how they stand in serial relationship, and realizing how they communicate with one another. Because I have stepped back from serialized planning, my drawings have moved towards spontaneous and reactionary processes, allowing the power of the present to dictate decisions. Throughout the program, I have learned that my strengths rely on play and innovation, which operate under more spontaneous parameters than conceptual planning.

My involvement in play began with an exploration of my sketchbook habits, an exploration which has become increasingly rigorous since my undergraduate degree. I was previously drawing from observation, letting the pen flow in dream-scape constructions and preliminary drawings for larger works. Often my sketchbook drawings would outshine my independent works because I poured so much time and energy into them. I have come to realize that the sketchbook went beyond the realm of preliminary drawings. I had developed techniques of shading, composition and mark making which carried over into larger works, and was in need of retooling.

By observing the relationship between sketchbook and independent works, I became aware of the corresponding relationship between thinking critically and letting the imagination dictate decisions. Since the sketchbook was a private investigation for my own purposes, I was free to explore in ways which were more challenging with larger works, which were destined to

be a varied imitation of the smaller scale. Additionally, the cost of mistakes is lower in a one-hour drawing as opposed to a 10-to 20 hour large scale mixed media piece. This ability to enter the play zone was fragile, and it was very hard to trick myself into entering this zone when my consciousness was formally sanctioning the decisions.

In my eagerness to experiment during my first nine months of my MFA, I cast a wide net of creative endeavors, which in hindsight served as a process of elimination. I was interested in rendering dynamism with a varied colour scheme and a randomized and variable process. I was thinking within the conceptual framework, with an “aim and shoot” approach. I learned my net was cast too widely for true learning to take place. My experiments were too wide ranging in media, size, and process for me to understand why specific successes and failures were happening. Each piece had different problems and for different reasons. For me, implementing self-made restrictions serves as an effective tool for self-discovery. See Figures 1-3.



Figure 1: Aaron, Both. *Experimentation 1*, 2016. Charcoal and acrylic.





Figure 2. Aaron Both. *Experimentation 2*, 2016. Charcoal and Acrylic.

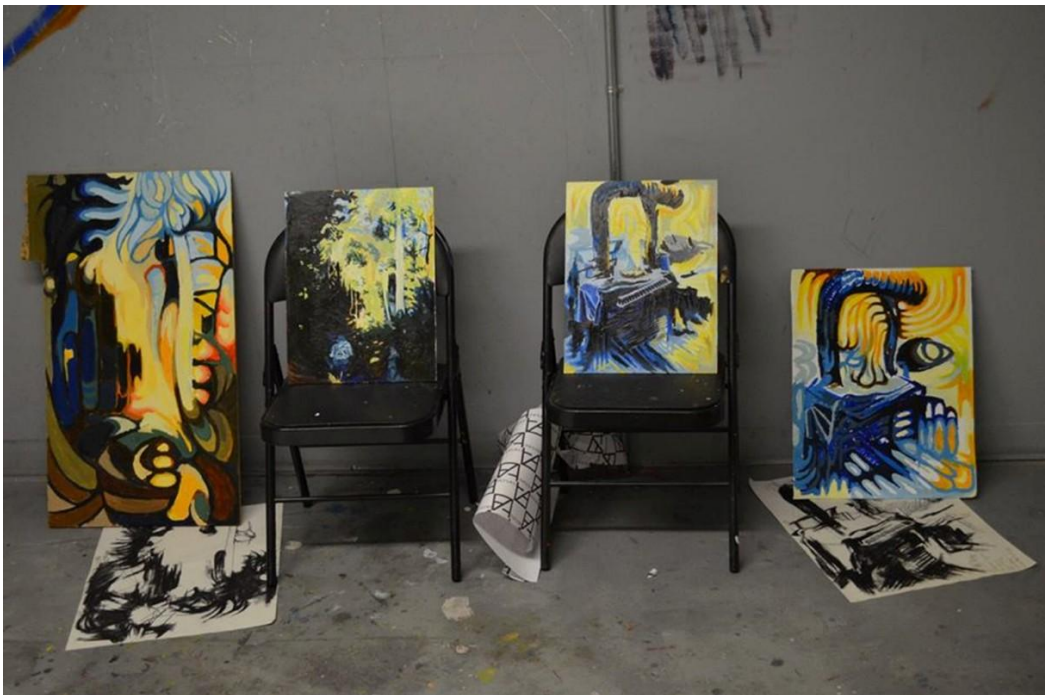


Figure 3. Aaron Both, *Experimentation 3*, 2016. Charcoal and acrylic.

During this period, I found that my natural abilities gravitate towards drawing rather than painting. I have noticed that established painters require a sophisticated understanding of colour and blending and an ability to think formally, technically, conceptually and critically, all of which require a great deal of planning. Each colour has material qualities, which take much practice to understand, and paintings typically require patience to achieve a particular vision. There is a different pacing, a relaxed mode, which speaks more towards serenity and fluidity than my interest in line work would allow. I have a strong curiosity, an impatience which attracts me to the directness of line work, slowly building from simplicity to complexity in a unidimensional path.

To maximize my zone of play, I was inspired by Jean Michel Basquiat's paintings to work large scale. His work has an energy, a playfulness, and a naïve complexity, which I was drawn to in my own experimentation. Basquiat worked directly from experience, with a multitude of synonymous stimuli, ranging from radio and television, to music, and books, as direct influences on his images. I found that this way of working fascinating, and in extension of the way I naturally worked, even before I discovered Basquiat. By drawing instead of painting, I can work at the same pace as my thoughts, which are constantly changing direction. I am in the moment, transcribing my thoughts on the page. I have found this transformation sparks innovation, and it is rewarding to rework the territory of a different artistic domain. Studying other visual artists forces me too much into direct comparison, which draws my creative resources into either acceptance or negation of their strengths. My undergraduate professors described my drawing style as having "one hand in the light socket and the other hand on the page." Drawing allows me to respond from my gut, my experience, in an unfiltered and genuine manner. My

discovery is strongest when it happens responsively, which is the result of my desire to learn from my hand instead of telling my hand what to do.

In *Notary*, Basquiat's multi-faceted pictorial approach is seen in all its glory. See Figure 4. He has combined drawings of the planets with academic studies of the male body and parasites, presumably gleaned from textbooks. His work accesses the complexity of lived human existence and exhibits it in a broken, diagrammatic picture plane. His riddle-like



Figure 4. Jean Michel Basquiat, *Notary*, 1983. Acrylic and crayon.

complexity is balanced by the familiarity of recurring symbols, in this case the “C” for copyright and the word Notary are peppered throughout his oeuvre.

I was transfixed by Basquiat's wide-ranging symbolism, which would inspire me in my *Finnegan's Wake* drawings. His work inspired in my art a radical transformation from large scale mixed media to small scale sketch-book drawings. I was eager to make art with a restricted plan of execution, and *Finnegan's Wake* served as the perfect tool for that exploration. *Finnegan's Wake* is a novel written by James Joyce, which follows a family of five as they co-dream the recurring rise and fall of civilisations throughout history. I was inspired to draw by his use of word combinations and dream-scape motifs. I would decipher "Triv and Quad" (one of the chapters) in three-

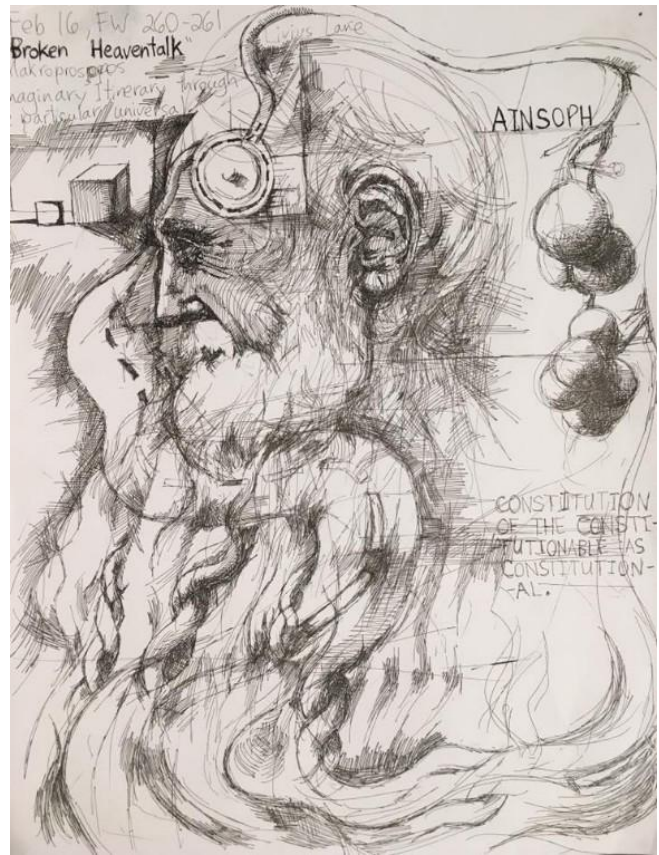


Figure 5. Aaron Both, *Triv and Quad: Broken Heaventalk*, 2017. Pen.

hour sessions, spending an hour to read two pages and underline words that I found evocative, and two hours using those words as a vehicle for a drawing. See Figure 5. I started experimenting with text in my work, as *Finnegan's Wake* incorporates many words with double or triple-meanings. This word usage forced me to re-think my understanding of mark making, as words carry meaning but also speak through visual language, which has physical as well as symbolic characteristics.





Figure 6. Aaron Both, *Tavernry and Feast*, 2017. Pen, India ink, watercolour and pencil.

In my “Tavernry and Feast” exploration, I was trying to emulate Basquiat’s vastness of expression. See Figures 6 and 7. Being drawn to his image conglomerations, I would take images out of my sketchbook and connect them to create a larger image. I was excited to play with bordering regions and invent interesting new ways to make the drawings communicate with their neighbours. The sheer possibilities of having small pictures inter-relate with larger scale statements was exciting.

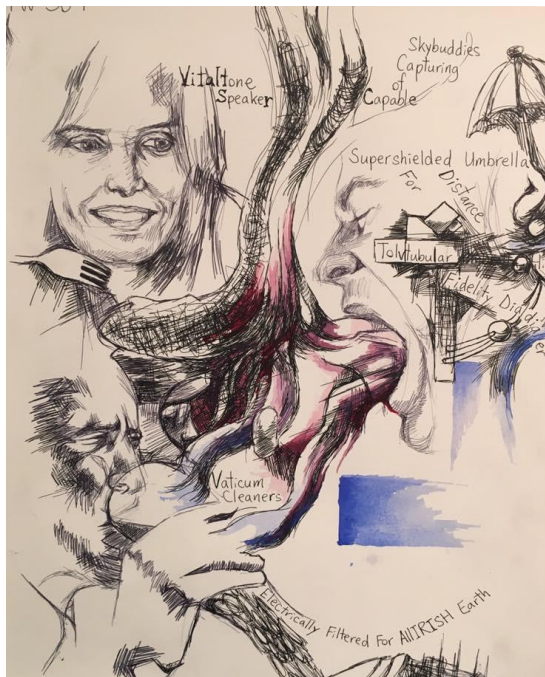


Figure 7. Aaron Both, *Tavernry and Feast: close-up, lower middle*, 2017. Pen and watercolour.

The time and material restrictions served to energize me to work in larger blocks of time. My creative destination in going to the studio was always unclear, which this series helped to clarify. This series involved a fixed creative zone, with minimal editing. This process also pushed me to play and experiment to avoid repeating myself, to keep myself entertained. I learned that intensive restrictions can be a useful tool to serve innovation because it is easier to think outside a box than trying to fill a box with infinite dimensions.

In addition, this increased productivity introduced a quantity of work that made me feel less attached to any individual piece, clarifying the relationship of one work to the next. I could console my ego with successful works when experiments went awry. I had a greater variety of pieces for formal comparison, which served as a tool for noticing problematic habits. Because I had spread my drawings across my studio wall, instructors and fellow students could examine trends in my work by direct comparison. The restricted nature of the *Finnegan's Wake* drawings promoted a further increase in production as a result of the insights gained by experimentation.

Whereas *Finnegan's Wake* complemented my imaginative strengths and served as a fixed zone of play, I became curious about other ways of achieving the same goals. It became apparent that my work, though self-satisfying, was not always communicating thoroughly to my audience. I was accustomed to using recognizable images to form a language for the viewer to interpret, which was perhaps too direct and void of nuance. I felt like I was standing on one side of a wall of interpretation and was curious about additionally standing with the viewer on the other side. I wanted to create images that brought the viewer into my journey of discovery, without a "right" or "wrong" answer. I was learning my strength lies in solving problems within a fixed temporal setting, which is a movement from conceptual to spontaneous creation. This way of working corresponds more with a conceptual wrestling than a resolution.

I found through serial analysis of *Finnegan's Wake* drawings that I had a tendency for "horror vacui," a fear of empty space. I had many ideas to communicate and was accustomed to using every inch of paper to fulfill a theme. As it turns out, my dynamic approach to drawing requires quiet space to balance out the noise of information with the serenity of absence. By

learning to leave spaces of absence, the pieces opened up to inference and possibility. There is a suggested periphery, a world adjacent to the drawing that is referenced. Additionally, by maintaining white space, I simplify the composition and increase the communicative power of the presence of my drawing against the absence of the void. Most importantly, by freeing sections of my drawing of detail the viewers are invited to participation, finishing the drawing in their imagination.



Figure 8. Claes Oldenburg, *Study for a Sculpture in the form of a vacuum cleaner- From side*, 1964. Chalk and watercolour.

Claes Oldenburg's *Study for a Sculpture in the Form of a Vacuum Cleaner*, has a down-to-earth honesty, which served as a sobering counterbalance to Basquiat's eccentricity. See Figure 8. Everything from the beautiful contrast of chalk against the green paper to the use of empty space above the object contains precision and care which help ground me in my creative process. The gentle lines and side-measurements contain a diagrammatic aspect which complements the roughness of the drawing, balancing the right-brain flourish with left-brain intention.

My art production in the winter of 2017/2018 was similar to the winter preceding it in my mixed media experimentation, but the period was more conducive to learning because I had become habituated to working serially. I was interested in moving from small to large scale

works because I enjoyed the expanded territory of exploration. I used sketching and photography to slow myself down in the decision-making process, which was especially useful when it came to larger works. Re-introducing the sketchbook to my process as a planning aid was a way to live through decisions and learn from disastrous results.

In addition, my experimentation ranged in media to a greater extent than the previous winter. I was drawing on cups, gluing fragments of work together, and working on scrap paper. I had temporarily embraced the attention span of a young child, not allowing fixation on any medium or focus for an extended period of time. I was searching for the perfect medium, paper or otherwise, which would serve me in my particular language of expression.

Drawing with pen on Terraskin emerged initially as a side project, to distract me from the intensity of a larger work, but quickly became a dominating interest. Terraskin is a paper composed mostly of stone, which has a smooth surface and creates a rich variety of possibilities when water and ink dry on the surface. The paper leaves room for editing as large swaths of the image can be wiped clean. The inks react on the hardened surface of the terraskin to create light washes that can act as a cure for my *horror vacui*, as the eye reads the area as relative absence.

I felt that this simple combination of Lamy Pen and Terraskin was the perfect playground to experiment with layering. I enjoyed how adding water would make the line work foggy, allowing a subtle form of graduation from light to dark. I had previously used pen and paper to achieve this graduation of tones by hatching and using a variety of marks to show various textures. I came to realize that letters, numbers and even objects can serve to build



tonal graduation. Allowing washes to complement this tonal play made for interesting areas of fragmentation and juxtaposition, and renewed my appetite for innovation.

This renewed experimentation had a natural complexity that induced me to restrict my subject matter. I have learned to stunt decision-making paralysis in new areas of exploration by rendering simple and familiar objects. Furthermore, I was excited to bring beauty to the ordinary and to show the complexity of common perception. Although images may seem simple, in fact, numerous elements, such as the viewer's distance and angle from the image, create infinite variations. By rendering the common object, I feel more acutely aware of my surroundings and observations, making me more astute.

*Splash zones* is about analysis and exploration, a re-engagement with basic perception. I chose objects which need help to become beautiful, as opposed to images already beautiful in the popular imagination, such as a sunset or flower. These traditionally beautiful images or landscapes hold power but have become icons through repetition and have become clichéd. I want to shine light on the fan, the back-hoe, or the unmade bed. By choosing subjects devoid of standardized beauty, I am re-engaging the beauty of basic perception. By fragmenting and overlapping my images, I am encouraging my audience to re-imagine familiar and mundane appearances with a fresh zeal. Children see a block of wood and a toy and make a goal post. As adults, it is important to "become children" in order to re-envision our environment, which we take for granted.

In several steps, my artwork has migrated from visual language to responsive exploration and play. During my MFA studies I made hundreds of images in various frameworks

and conceptions to understand the mode in which I make. In a strange subject-object reversal, I have come to see myself as a tool of a particular kind, and have learned to embrace my idiosyncrasies. This myriad of explorations has been a mirror, showing me the essence of what art making is and where I stand in relation to it. Initially I was engaging in two-dimensional dictation; now I engage in a conversation with my artwork. My artistic understanding has undergone the scientific equivalent of Einstein's theory of Relativity. Are we carving away at the object or is the object carving away at us? For me, trying to answer this question is tantamount to asking which blade of the scissors does the cutting.....

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